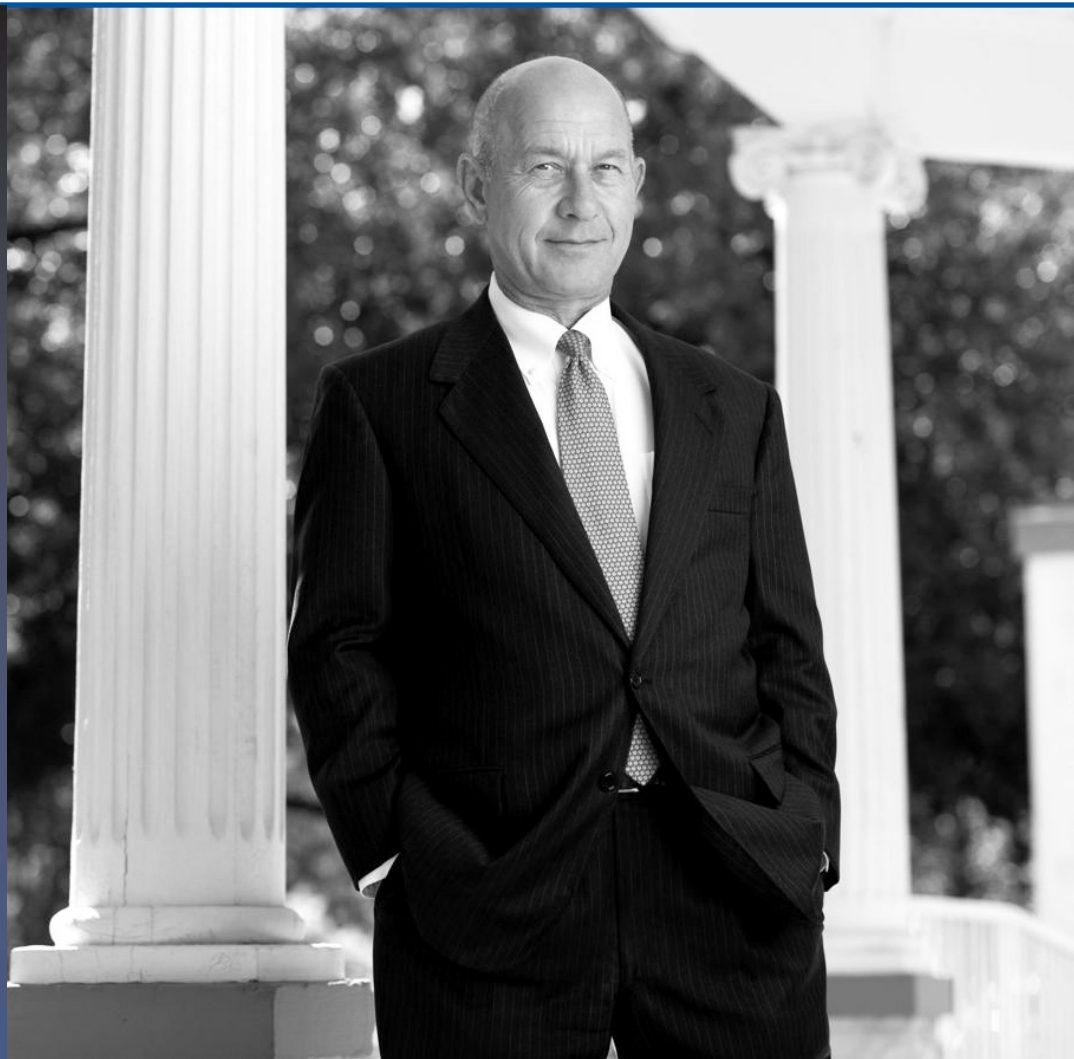


# SENATOR JOHN WHITMIRE

## Senate District 15 • Capitol Report



### *Dear Friends and Neighbors,*

The 140-day regular session of the 85th Legislature ended May 29th. But after a very short break, the Governor called the Legislature back to Austin for a 30-day special session from July 18th through August 16th.

As Chair of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee, I continue to focus on improvements to our adult and juvenile justice systems with special attention to ensuring justice and fairness for those who find themselves in our criminal justice system. Not only are we closing costly prisons in Texas, we continue to fund alternatives to incarceration and treatment programs which save lives, save families, and help prevent the next victim.

As a member of the Senate Business and Commerce Committee, I advocate for protecting local control, defending your rights in the courtroom, and ensuring access to quality and affordable insurance. Some very serious issues come before the Business and Commerce Committee and I take pride in representing the people's voice.

In the Senate Finance Committee, I use my seniority to advocate for funding for the state's crucial services and programs including public education, affordable higher education, and access to quality health care and services. We are a state of vast resources and we cannot continue to underfund state government while Texas continues to grow and we cannot continue to push the costs of governing to local governments and local taxpayers.

This fall, the Lieutenant Governor and Speaker will assign Senate and House committees a variety of issues to be considered by the 86th Legislature. I am hopeful with these studies we will be prepared to tackle some of the issues that continue to face our state, including school finance, bail reform, teacher and state employee benefits, and services to disabled children.

As the longest serving member in the Texas Senate, I serve as Dean of the Texas Senate. I take my seniority and role as Dean very seriously. I continue to use my position to work toward solutions and compromise during times of intense debate and negotiations. I believe it is important that we fight partisan gridlock and take care of the people's business as we are elected to do. The decisions we make in Austin impact all Texans; no matter where you live, what you do for a living, or which political party you represent.

It is my honor to continue to represent Senate District 15 and to work on your behalf in our community and in Austin. I am pleased to provide an update on some of the important issues facing the State of Texas and the residents and families of Senate District 15.

Sincerely,

JOHN WHITMIRE

# IN OUR COMMUNITY

## A LOOK AT SENATE DISTRICT 15

Senate District 15 is composed of north Houston and parts of Harris County. With the population growth in Texas, Senate districts are now larger than Texas congressional districts and represent approximately 850,000 Texans.

Senate District 15 includes residents from the City of Houston, City of Baytown, City of Humble, and Jacinto City. It also includes residents of the communities of Atascocita, Barrett Station, Channelview, Cloverleaf, Highlands, and Sheldon. Nearly 300,000 residents of Senate District 15 live in the unincorporated area of Harris County.

There are 13 independent school districts represented in Senate District 15 including Aldine, Channelview, Crosby, Cypress-Fairbanks, Deer Park, Galena Park, Goose Creek Consolidated, Houston, Humble, Klein, Sheldon, Spring Branch, and Spring ISDs.

Senate District 15 is rich in diversity and is considered a majority-minority district. As of the last United States Census, the district population was 27.8% Anglo, 24.7% Black, 42.9% Hispanic, and 5.6% Asian or other.

“Senate District 15 encompasses many ethnicities, communities, and interests, and I am honored to have represented the district for the past 34 years,”stated Senator Whitmire. “We are a diverse community, rich in history, and represent a true snapshot of our state and country.”



*Senator Whitmire and Mayor Sylvester Turner receive the Acres Home Chamber for Business and Economic Development 28th Annual Award in Politics.*

## PROTECTING LOCAL CONTROL

More and more often, local elected officials are seeing their power eroded by the Texas Legislature. Two sessions ago, Senator Whitmire helped block legislation that would have prevented the City of Houston from regulating payday and auto title lenders.

This legislative session and special session, Senator Whitmire stood with local leaders in opposition to further attempts to thwart local control. Legislation to curb cities' abilities to adopt ordinances on anti-discrimination policies, plastic bag bans, tree protections, regulation of short-term rentals, texting and hands-free dialing, and transportation network companies were just some of the bills filed in attempts to take away control from our local governments.

“I do not want the State of Texas telling our local officials how to run our cities and counties any more than I want Washington telling Texas how we should run our state,” stated

Senator Whitmire. “Local government is closest to the people whether it is our school board, city or county government, and I will continue my efforts to protect their rights and ability to govern and represent their constituencies.”

## TICKETING & TRUANCY IN OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

During the last legislative session, Senator Whitmire sponsored and passed bipartisan legislation decriminalizing truancy in Texas. Prior to this change in law, truancy cases were plaguing our schools, clogging up our courts, harming families, and doing nothing to address the root causes of truancy.

Supporters of the legislation believe the priority should be on family and school involvement and prevention rather than punishment. Opponents claimed the lack of criminal punishment would lead to a drastic rise in school absences. While the law is still new, the first year of data collected shows a dramatic drop of nearly 90 percent in truancy court filings and a slight increase, not decrease, in school attendance.

“I have worked for several sessions against much opposition to reform truancy and ticketing in our public schools and, while the battle was difficult, the initial results are promising,” stated Senator Whitmire. “When schools, families, and counselors come together to address the reasons children skip school, we are much more successful in making a positive difference in the life and behavior of our children.”

## DRIVERS' LICENSE OFFICES

In June, the Texas Department of Public Safety announced it would be reducing operating hours at some of its busiest drivers' license offices including four locations in the Houston area. These cuts and staff layoffs were being made to save \$21 million in funding despite the agency having a budget of over \$1 billion a year, including \$800 million over the biennium for border security in just two Texas counties.

After receiving complaints from local leaders including Senator Whitmire, DPS reversed the decision and the offices will operate at normal hours. “We've all seen the long lines wrapped around the building and heard the stories of people ordering pizza while they wait,” commented Senator Whitmire. “I am thankful DPS reversed their decision, but will continue to monitor the service Texas taxpayers are receiving at drivers' license offices and other government offices.”



*Senators Whitmire, Miles, and Garcia discuss matters important to Houston and Harris County on the Senate floor.*



# CRIMINAL JUSTICE & PUBLIC SAFETY

As Chairman of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee, Senator Whitmire is committed to improving the adult and juvenile criminal justice systems and providing for a fairer system of justice while also enhancing and protecting public safety.

## CLOSING PRISONS

In 2007, the Legislature was faced with the need for three additional prisons at the cost of millions of dollars in construction and maintenance. Senator Whitmire used his experience in criminal justice and his position on Senate Finance to convince his colleagues to invest in substance abuse treatment, mental health programs, and alternatives to incarceration. Not only did this change in policy save millions of dollars, it put Texas on a path of reshaping the criminal justice system without compromising public safety.

In 2011 and after decades of costly expansion, Texas shuttered its first prison. Now, just six years later, the state completed the closing of its 8th prison unit. Four of those closures occurred just this summer. At the same time, the prison system has added over 500 additional treatment beds to help meet the demand.

“Increased funding for treatment and rehabilitation combined with changes in laws on how we deal with low-level offenders has allowed Texas to remain tough, but smart on crime,” commented Chairman Whitmire. “Criminal justice reform is a shining example of people from both political parties coming together to make a positive difference and I look forward to continuing our work in the years to come.”



*Senator Whitmire attends the prison seminary graduation at the Darrington Unit in Texas.*

## JENNY'S LAW

In response to the horrendous treatment of a rape victim by the Harris County criminal justice system, Senator Whitmire authored Senate Bill 291 known as “Jenny’s Law.” The new law stems from the case of a young rape victim who was jailed for over a month by Harris County prosecutors in order to ensure her testimony at the trial of the serial rapist who was ultimately convicted of sexually assaulting her.

The law which went into effect September 1st requires potential witnesses be provided court-appointed attorneys at their hearings. The law also requires a witness be granted



*Senator Whitmire with Houston Police officers after his remarks at the 2017 Texas Peace Officers Memorial Service and Candlelight Vigil.*

a hearing after 24 hours of being confined and a subsequent hearing 15 days later.

“Jenny was not a defendant in this case, she was an innocent victim being kept in custody to compel her testimony,” stated Senator Whitmire. “No matter the importance of the case, you cannot deny someone their rights and we cannot allow a victim of a horrific crime to be further victimized by the courts.”

## THE SANDRA BLAND ACT

Texans were rightfully outraged by the horrific treatment and arrest of Sandra Bland during a routine traffic stop ultimately leading to her tragic suicide while locked up in a county jail cell. In response, Senator Whitmire and Representative Garnet Coleman filed and passed the Sandra Bland Act.

The new law requires law enforcement to make a good faith effort to divert people arrested for non-violent offenses to mental health and treatment services. The law also required jailers to receive de-escalation training and training on how to immediately identify and respond to the mental health and medical needs of inmates.

In a companion bill, co-authored by Senator Whitmire, on civilian and police interactions, both students and law enforcement will receive training on how to interact during law enforcement encounters including de-escalation training for law enforcement officers in Texas.

Unfortunately due to opposition, provisions removed from the Sandra Bland Act included prohibiting officers from stopping vehicles for a traffic violation as a means to investigate other potential crimes and a prohibition on searching vehicles based solely on a driver’s verbal consent.

“I was pleased to join with Representative Coleman to pass the Sandra Bland Act,” stated Senator Whitmire. “While the final legislation did not include everything we wanted, it is a step in the right direction. As with many other major changes in policy and law, I am committed to coming back session after session to continue our work to honor the life of Sandra Bland and others whose tragic deaths serve as a wake-up call that we must change our actions, behavior, and laws.”

# THE 85<sup>TH</sup> LEGISLATURE

## STATE BUDGET

Although it appeared the House and Senate were not going to be able to reach an agreement on the amount or financing of the state budget, the Legislature ultimately approved a \$217 billion state budget for the 2018-19 biennium.

Previous budget decisions, including \$4 billion in tax cuts in 2015 and nearly \$5 billion dedicated to transportation, left budget writers with a lot less available money. In addition, much of the state budget is already dedicated to certain areas of government leaving little extra funding for crucial services.

The two-year budget provides increased funding for child protective services and funding for crucial infrastructure repairs at our state mental hospitals and state assisted living facilities. Unfortunately, the budget failed to restore therapy services to disabled children and did not provide adequate funding for our state employee and teacher retirement and health care systems.



*Senator Whitmire meets with a group of outstanding Houston teachers during the legislative session.*

The budget also continues over \$800 million for border security largely through the Texas Department of Public Safety and mostly focused in two Texas counties while the rest of the state has seen a decrease in law enforcement presence and services.

Recent reports show that when the Legislature reconvenes in January 2019, budget writers will be faced with an almost \$8 billion hole to fill before they even get started on the next biennial budget. This estimate includes \$2 billion for the state's Medicaid program and \$3.6 billion deferred from transportation projects.

“We are a state of vast resources with more than \$11 billion in our rainy day fund, but have failed to keep up with our growth in population or our need for services,” commented Senator Whitmire. “I will continue to use my seat on Senate Finance to advocate for increased funding and for responsible tax and spending policies which provide adequate funding for our schools and universities, highways, health and human services, public safety and infrastructure.”

## SCHOOL FINANCE AND PROPERTY TAXES

Since the Texas Supreme Court upheld our school finance system as constitutional, lawmakers were not under a deadline to fix our outdated and inadequate school finance laws and did not pass meaningful school finance reform in either the regular or special session.

While the House plan would have increased the state's share of public education funding by \$1.8 billion, the Senate would not commit to this level of funding and focused more on the creation of a school finance commission to make recommendations on reforming our system.

The bill that ultimately passed during the special session creates a school finance commission to look at reforming our funding system. While the bill did include \$212 million to cover increases in retired teacher health care costs and assistance for students with certain disabilities, it does little if anything for urban school districts that are struggling to keep schools open and meet state mandates.

As property values continue to increase, districts collect more property tax revenue at the local level and the state is able to contribute less to fund public schools. Over time, the state's share of public education funding has steadily declined and is now down to 38 percent with school property taxes making up the rest.

At the same time, districts like Houston Independent School District have found themselves having to send local tax dollars back to the state to be redistributed to other school districts or charter schools as required by recapture, or the so-called “robin hood” law.

“We all feel the pressure of rising property taxes. But until we have a complete overhaul of our school finance system and significantly increase the state's share of education funding, we will not have meaningful property tax relief,” stated Senator Whitmire. “Our students, teachers and the future of our state depend on a well-funded and equitable system. I look forward to starting over from scratch to develop a system that returns public education as our state's top priority.”



*Senator Whitmire discusses retired teacher benefits and health care with some of our dedicated retired teachers.*



# ABOUT SENATOR JOHN WHITMIRE



Senator John Whitmire is a native Texan. Originally from Hillsboro, Senator Whitmire moved to Houston where he graduated from Waltrip High School. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Houston and attended the Bates College of Law. He was admitted to the Texas State Bar in 1981 and is attorney of counsel to the law firm of Locke Lord LLP.

Senator Whitmire was elected to the Texas House of Representatives in 1972 when he was 22 years old. After serving 10 years as a State Representative, he was elected to the Texas Senate in 1982 and has represented the 15th Senatorial District for the past 35 years. Senator Whitmire ranks first in seniority and is the “Dean of the Texas Senate.”

Senator Whitmire serves as Chair of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee and works to bring about improvements and increase fairness in the adult and juvenile criminal justice systems. He is also a member of the Senate Business and Commerce Committee and the Senate Finance Committee where he is committed to finding appropriate solutions for funding the state’s many critical agencies and programs.

In addition to his leadership in criminal justice and public safety, Senator Whitmire is a passionate advocate for quality public education, affordable higher education, minority and women’s rights, equality and justice for all Texans, access to affordable health care and mental health services, and sound business and economic development policies.

Senator Whitmire is the proud father of two daughters and grandfather of two grandsons.

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*Senator Whitmire with his daughters on the opening day of session.*



*Senator Whitmire with his grandsons in the Senate Chamber.*

## HELPFUL TOLL FREE NUMBERS

Abuse Hotline (children, elderly, disabled) .....	800-252-5400	Governor’s Constituent Communication ....	800-843-5789
Children’s Health Insurance (CHIP) .....	866-959-6555	Insurance Information and Assistance .....	800-252-3439
Child Support Enforcement.....	800-252-8014	Legal Referral.....	800-252-9690
Consumer Protection.....	800-621-0508	Medicaid Hotline.....	800-252-8263
Consumer Credit Helpline.....	800-538-1579	Runaway Hotline .....	888-580-4357
Crime Victims Compensation .....	800-983-9933	Student Financial Aid.....	877-782-7322
Crime Stoppers.....	800-252-8477	Comptroller’s Taxpayer Assistance .....	800-252-5555
Emergency Roadside Assistance.....	800-525-5555	Voter Registration and Elections .....	800-252-8683
Environmental Complaints .....	888-777-3186	Youth Hotline .....	800-210-2278

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- Business Sales Tax Payments
- Driver's License Renewal
- Driver Records
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- Hunting and Fishing Licenses

**www.workintexas.gov**

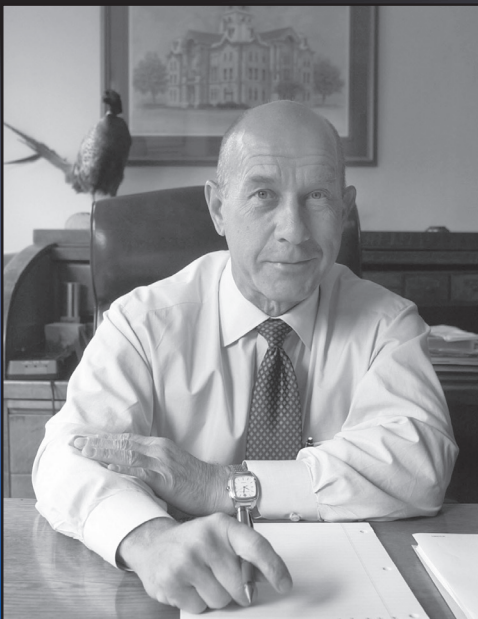
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